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Tarnished Laureate

Larry Rohter

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For Rigoberta Menchú, the painful road to world prominence began in this impoverished and isolated tangle of mountains, cloud forest, and peasant hamlets. As winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, she has become an internationally acclaimed spokeswoman for—and symbol of—the rights of indigenous peoples, based largely on her best-selling account of growing up here as an uneducated and oppressed member of the Quiche people.

In the autobiography *I, Rigoberta Menchú,* first published in Spanish in 1983 at the height of Guatemala's brutal civil war, Ms. Menchú, now thirty-nine, tells a wrenching tale of violence, destruction, misery, and exploitation as moving and disturbing as a Victor Hugo novel. So powerful was the book's impact that it immediately transformed her into a celebrated and much-sought-after human rights campaigner and paved the way for her being awarded the Nobel Prize.

Key details of that story, though, are untrue, according to a new book written by an American anthropologist, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans.* Based on nearly a decade of interviews with more than 120 people and archival research, the anthropologist, David Stoll, concludes that Ms. Menchú's book "cannot be the eyewitness account it purports to be" because the Nobel laureate repeatedly describes "experiences she never had herself."

Using contacts provided by Dr. Stoll and others found independently, a reporter for the *New York Times* conducted several interviews here in early December that contradict Ms. Menchú's account. Relatives, neighbors, friends, and former classmates of Rigoberta Menchú, including an older brother and half sister and four Roman Catholic nuns who educated and sheltered her, indicated that many of the main episodes related by Ms. Menchú have either been fabricated or seriously exaggerated. This is the way they recall it:

The land dispute central to the book was a long and bitter family feud that pitted her father against his in-laws, and not a battle against wealthy landowners of European descent who manipulated government agencies into trying to drive her father and other Indian peasants off unclaimed land that they had cleared and farmed.

A younger brother whom Ms. Menchú says she saw die of starvation never existed, while a second, whose suffering she says she and her parents were forced to watch as he was being burned alive by army troops, was killed in entirely different circumstances when the family was not present.

Contrary to Ms. Menchú's assertion in the first page of her book that "I never went to school" and could not speak Spanish or read or write until shortly before she dictated the text of *I, Rigoberta Menchú,* she in fact received the equivalent of a middle-school education as a scholarship student at two prestigious private boarding schools operated by Roman Catholic nuns. Because she spent much of her youth in the boarding schools, it is extremely unlikely that she could have worked as an underground political organizer and spent up to eight months a year laboring on coffee and cotton plantations, as she describes in great detail in her book.

Her Defense: Racist Politics to Blame, She Says

In an interview in September, Ms. Menchú repeatedly declined to respond to the discrepancies the Stoll manuscript raises. "I'm proud of the book," she said, describing it as "part of the historical memory and patrimony of Guatemala" and dismissing any criticism as part of a racist political agenda intended to gain attention and publicity.

"There have been fifteen thousand theses written about me all over the world by people who have read the book and made commentaries

about it," she continued, referring to her autobiography, which has been translated into at least a dozen languages. "I don't dedicate myself to checking this, and I don't deny or contradict what is said in books about me. That's not my job." Ms. Menchú declined repeated recent requests for comment.

Aside from one person, those interviewed in Guatemala have not read her book and were sympathetic to Ms. Menchú and the trials she and her family underwent during Guatemala's thirty-six-year civil war, which ended in 1996. Between 1979 and 1983, Rigoberta Menchú's father, mother, and two brothers all died at the hands of government security forces, everyone here acknowledges.

"She suffered greatly, seeing her whole family dispersed by the violence," said Clemente Díaz Cano, a neighbor and contemporary of Ms. Menchú. "The truth may be distinct from how she has told it, but that does not mean Rigoberta did not suffer greatly in those years." The exception is Alfonso Rivera, one of the few people here who has actually read Ms. Menchú's autobiography. As the clerk for the municipal government for thirty years, he kept all official records. "The book is one lie after another, and she knows it," Mr. Rivera said. "When she visited here, I asked her how she could say such things, and she could not give me a satisfactory answer."

At the time she wrote her autobiography, which has since been added to the reading lists of universities around the world, Ms. Menchú was an anonymous exile seeking to focus international attention on the suffering of Guatemala's predominantly Indian peasantry. The success of the book led human rights advocates to treat her as the embodiment of the indigenous cause, and in 1992 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize "in recognition of her work for social justice and ethno-cultural reconciliation."

The Nobel Panel: "No Question" of Revoking Prize

Geir Lundestad, director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute and permanent secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, said in a telephone interview from Oslo that he was aware of the Stoll manuscript and had no reason to doubt its veracity. Nevertheless, he said, "there is no question of revoking the prize" to Ms. Menchú. "All autobiographies embellish to a greater or lesser extent," he continued. He added that the decision to award the prize to Ms. Menchú "was not based exclusively or primarily on the autobiography" and that while "the details of the family history are not without relevance, they are not particularly important, and so this will lead to no reconsideration on our part."

During the last year, Ms. Menchú has sought to distance herself from her autobiography. Any problems with the text, she suggested, are the responsibility of Elisabeth Burgos, the Venezuelan anthropologist who interviewed Ms. Menchú, transcribed and edited the resulting twenty-six hours of tapes, and secured a publishing contract.

"I am the protagonist of the book, and it was my testimony, but I am not the author," Ms. Menchú maintained during the September interview, describing her current relationship with Ms. Burgos as "nonexistent" because of a disagreement over publishing royalties. "She gave the book its final form, so she is officially the author of the book and has the commercial rights to it."

But in a new book published in Spanish this spring and in English in October as *Crossing Borders* (New York: Verso Books), Ms. Menchú asserts precisely the opposite. She maintains there that she had full and final authority over her book. "I censored various parts that seemed imprudent to me," Ms. Menchú writes in the new book. "I removed the parts that referred to our village, a lot of detail about my little brothers, many details about names."

In a telephone interview from her home in Paris, Ms. Burgos said that "every phrase in the book comes from what Rigoberta Menchú said on the tapes." She said she still has the original recordings, some of which Dr. Stoll was able to listen to, and is willing to make them available to a university so that other researchers can have access to them.

The Neighbors: Local People Tell a Different Story

As published, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* portrays Vicente Menchú Pérez, his wife Juana Tum Cotojá, and their nine children, of whom Rigoberta was the sixth, as devout Christians forced by poverty, Indian blood, and lack of education to endure unending misery and exploitation. In the end, the entire family becomes involved in a left-wing peasant movement, but are cruelly killed or driven into exile by Guatemalan security forces.

The unifying thread of the tale is the twenty-two-year struggle by Vicente Menchú to gain title to fertile land that he cleared and tilled himself, but that was coveted by wealthy ranchers who harassed him with bureaucrats and gunmen. But that is not how people here, including

close relatives, remember the situation. As they tell it, Vicente Menchú was locked in a battle with Antonio Tum Castro, his wife's uncle, and his sons.

"The Tums were our enemies," Rosa Menchú Calam, the Nobel laureate's fifty-eight-year-old half sister, said in an interview here. "They were always cutting the barbed wire on our fences, and they would send their animals into my late father's fields to eat our corn so that we would not have enough to eat."

Rosa Menchú's recollections were echoed by other residents of this remote town of 5,500 people. Their account is also supported by more than six hundred pages of government records on file at the headquarters of the National Agrarian Transformation Institute in the Guatemalan capital.

The records cover more than thirty years, and indicate that the Menchú and Tum families repeatedly challenged each other's claims to a fertile parcel of 373 acres that both wanted, and frequently filed complaints about each other's behavior. There is virtually no mention of the Brol, Garciá, or Martínez families, the Spanish-speaking landowning elite that Rigoberta Menchú asserts sought to drive her father off his land.

"No, it was a family quarrel that went on for years and years," said Efraín Galindo, who was mayor of Uspantán from 1970 through 1972. "I wanted peace, but none of us could get them to negotiate a settlement."

Her Brothers: Account of Deaths Said to Be Untrue

People interviewed here also expressed skepticism about Ms. Menchú's account of the deaths of two of her brothers. In one of the most heartbreaking episodes of the book, Ms. Menchú tells how in 1967 she watched her youngest brother, Nicolás, die of malnutrition while the family was working for slave wages on a coffee plantation in southern Guatemala.

But Nicolás Menchú turns out to be alive and well, the owner of a well-kept homestead here. He is forty-nine, a full decade older than his famous sister, and said in an interview that he had no recollection of a younger brother who died in the fashion described in the book, an affirmation repeated by Rosa Menchú.

"I had two brothers who died of hunger and disease, one named Felipe and another whose name escapes me," Mr. Menchú said. "But I never knew them, because they both passed away before I was even born, and I was born in 1949."

Family members and residents expressed similar doubts about Ms. Menchú's account of the death of another brother, Petrocinio. In her book, she describes how she, the rest of her family, and fellow residents of Uspantán are summoned to the nearby town of Chajul, where her younger brother and other prisoners are lined up. Gasoline is poured over them, and "then the soldiers set fire to each one of them."

Residents here have many grievances against the army and were quick to recount other abuses. But they could not recall an incident anywhere in the region of a mass public execution by burning.

"Around here, nobody was ever burned alive that way," said Mr. Díaz, the neighbor of the Menchú family. "It was a dirty war here. They kidnapped you from your home, and nobody knew where you were killed. That's how Petrocinio and a whole lot of other people died."

"I don't know exactly what happened to Petrocinio," said Nicolás Menchú. "I know that he was kidnapped and handed over to the army. After that, I heard that they kept him in a hole, and that then they shot him."

According to family members and residents, Petrocinio's body was dressed in the olive green uniform of the guerrillas and dumped, along with the bodies of several other youths suspected by the army of sympathizing with insurgents, in the town square in Chajul. "Some acquaintances of my father recognized his body and sent news that he had been killed," Nicolás Menchú said.

Family members, neighbors, and the nuns who educated her were even more emphatic that Rigoberta Menchú received a level of education unusual at the time for an Indian girl. In her autobiography, Ms. Menchú maintains that she never received any formal schooling, in part because her family labored on the plantations, but also because her father did not want it.

But "my father thought that life was hard and that there was nothing here for us, no school at all," Nicolás Menchú said. "He had a lot of ideas, and since he couldn't read or write a letter himself, he believed it was necessary for us to get as much instruction as we could."

Her Schooling: Nuns Recall a Gifted Pupil

Nicolás and Rosa Menchú, who with their other siblings received only a rudimentary education, said that Rigoberta was singled out for special treatment because Belgian nuns who were friends of the family thought

her unusually bright and promising. They recalled their little sister correcting their imperfect Spanish and proudly showing off her ability to read and write when she visited home on vacation from boarding school.

"Rigoberta was about five years old when my father enrolled her in school," Nicolás Menchú said. "She went off to boarding school in Chichicastenango and stayed there for about three years before returning."

According to Rosa Menchú, Rigoberta had to come back because the family was experiencing money problems. But as she and the family's friends and neighbors tell it, the Belgian nuns again came to the rescue, arranging for Rigoberta to live in their convent here while she attended school for a year.

"Our congregation had a very close relationship with the Menchú family," said Sister Magdalena van Meerhaeghe, a sixty-year-old Belgian nun from the Order of the Sacred Family who confirmed the arrangement. "Her father was a catechist, and when we went up to do work in their area, her mother fed us."

In separate interviews, Sister Magdalena and three other nuns, all affiliated with the Order of the Sacred Family and the private school they operated, the Belgian-Guatemalan Institute, clearly recollected Rigoberta as a gifted pupil. They said she studied at their school in the capital and a branch in the province of Huehuetenango, completing the equivalent of the first year of junior high school.

"I can't tell you for certain what years those were, because we no longer have the records," Sister Magdalena said. "But I do know that when her father was killed in January 1980, Rigoberta had just enrolled in her second year of middle school" and thus was not working as an underground political organizer, as she maintains in her autobiography.

Because the Guatemalan school year runs from mid-January to the end of October, classmates and relatives said, it would have been virtually impossible for Rigoberta Menchú to have spent up to eight months a year as a farm laborer, as she maintains in her book. "Since she was studying, she couldn't go to work on the plantations," said Rosa Menchú.

In his book, Dr. Stoll concludes that Ms. Menchú drew on experience common to others in Guatemala and "drastically revised the prewar experience of her village to suit the needs of the revolutionary organization she had joined" and on whose behalf she was touring Europe when she dictated her life story to Ms. Burgos.

"By presenting herself as an everywoman, she has tried to be all things to all people in a way no individual can be," Dr. Stoll writes. As a result, it is necessary for readers "to distinguish between what can be corroborated and what cannot, what is probable and what is highly improbable."